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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 002217

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LAPTOPS IN LIMPOPO: INTERNET COMES TO A SOUTH
AFRICAN VILLAGE

REF: HURISA/LIMPOPO CABLE

Summary

¶1. MIT Media Labs' "One Laptop Per Child" initiative has
arrived in South Africa, bringing portable computers and
internet access to an initial few hundred school children in
deprived communities of Soweto, Durban, and Limpopo. U.S.
college students from Indiana University raised $60,000 to
buy 102 laptops, travel to Limpopo, build a wireless network,
and distribute the PCs to fifth graders in Makgeng, a village
without electricity, running water, or books. The PCs are
specially designed for children -- small, lightweight,
waterproof, colorful -- and include software for web
browsing, e-book reading, word processing, music composition,
drawing, and real-time video chat. While their parents and
teachers may be hesitant, the twelve-year-olds have adopted
them with alacrity. End Summary.

Makgeng Village, Limpopo

¶2. On October 3-4 poloff visited several sites (reftel) in
the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province, one of South
Africa's poorest regions of small rural villages and minimal
infrastructure. The landscape is reminiscent of the American
Southwest -- arid, rocky, and red-soiled, where bony cattle
graze on sparse brush grass amid aloe and cactii. Dry earth
makes subsistence farming difficult, particularly with wells
gone dry and water brought in by tanker trunk. Homes have no
plumbing or electricity. The main area employer is a lumber
mill, processing pine lumber from man-made forests in nearby
hills. Unemployment and illiteracy are high, and many
families live off government grants of child support funding
and food parcels. The village's new Maweshi Primary School,
donated by a local Rotary Club chapter, is a solid building
but empty of books. Newspaper articles taped up on walls
constitute reading material.

OLPC: PCs for Poor Kids Worldwide

¶3. One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) is a nonprofit initiative
launched by MIT Media Labs' Nicholas Negroponte to donate
low-cost and rugged notebook computers to poor children of
the third world. (For details see http://laptop.org and
http://wiki.laptop.org.) The resulting "XO" machine is
designed for kids: smaller and lighter than regular PCs, with
a waterproof keyboard sized to small fingers, and a carrying
handle. Its bright colors prompt comparison to Fischer-
Price toys. The XO's screen resolution is sharp, however,

and it comes loaded with an open-source operating system and software ranging from a web browser to e-book reader and puzzle games, as well as applications for word processing, drawing, and composing music. A built-in video camera and wireless modem enable video chat with other users.

¶4. Private donors, largely in the U.S., have funded XO rollouts to schools in poor countries around the world, from Pakistan to Peru and Nigeria to Haiti since 2007. Although Negroponte's original and publicity-grabbing goal was the "100-dollar PC", the actual cost achieved by OLPC came close at $200 per unit. OLPC's "Give One, Get One" (G1G1) campaign, under which consumers pay $400 to buy one XO while donating a second, has sold more than 185,000 laptops, according to the OLPC user group site. OLPC recently announced an alliance to sell XO's on Amazon.com from Thanksgiving of this year, to raise awareness and expand the G1G1 effort. The program has this year come to South Africa, QG1G1 effort. The program has this year come to South Africa, with implementations in Durban, the Soweto district of Johannesburg, and most recently Limpopo.

US/SA Partnership

¶5. Limpopo's XO project was a collaboration between area NGO Thusanang Trust and volunteers from Indiana. Thusunang runs a community center in nearby Haenertsberg focused on early child development, provision of childcare, parenting skills, and training of child care providers. The NGO helped identify the schools to receive the XOs and provided language and logistical support to visitors. The town lumber mill

donated internet bandwidth for a wireless network. Indiana University's "One Here One There" (http://www.indiana.edu/ iuohot/) project promoting education in Africa raised $60,000 to fund 102 laptops, ancillary equipment (such as a generator), and travel costs for a dozen students to build the network in August while training the recipients to use computers for the first time. The effort was entirely a private one, without USG or SAG involvement.

Demo: Window on the World

¶6. School was on a holiday break on the day of our visit, but five students demonstrated their laptops for us. Each child had been given one PC, as personal property labeled with his / her name and personalized with stickers, to take home each night and bring to school each morning to recharge via a gasoline-powered generator. Most children live within range of the school's wireless network, so in the evenings they can share the PCs with family members. Prior to distribution of the PCs, Thusanang staff conducted workshops carefully counseling children, parents, and teachers on their individual duties to safeguard XOs from theft, and no laptops have gone missing.

¶7. Fifth graders aged 11 to 13 were chosen as the PC recipients, because they were considered at an optimal stage to adopt new skills quickly with a sufficient knowledge of English. (Thusanang's program officer commented that their verbal fluency in English improved noticeably during the Indiana students' three-week visit alone.) They showed us the PCs' built-in video cameras, played with puzzles and music software, googled news of SA's newly selected President, called up world maps, and read us essays they had written on the computer. After only a month of playing with the computers, they were still looking over one another's shoulders and copying new ideas.

Comment: A Leap Forward

¶8. With these laptops the post-apartheid generation of young
South Africans has the potential to leapfrog ahead of their
parents and teachers, into the twenty-first century. The
kids showed off their PCs with a nonchalant can-do attitude
typical of twelve year olds anywhere, giggling at their
grandmother who found it all too confusing, and guiding her
hands to show her how to type. Their teachers are reportedly
more hesitant with the PCs and have not yet integrated their
use into group lessons. In all likelihood the kids will
advance quickly, leaving the adults behind -- which is in
fact an ideal outcome in a nation desperately needing to
shape a future sharply different from its past, accelerating
expansion of education and its opportunities to a wider
segment of society. End Comment.

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